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Heir to Stonemoor

STONEMOOR HOUSE

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Kay Stephens was born and brought up in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Her love of books increased while she spent the first seven years of her working life as a librarian, and throughout a subsequent business career she cherished the urge to write.

Although now living with her husband in Kent, Kay's affection for Yorkshire ensures that its valleys and moors frequently feature as the setting for her novels.

Away from her desk, she enjoys reading (for which there is never sufficient time), walking and gardening, and exploring the seashore, the countryside and old houses. Her other interests including travelling, languages, crossword puzzles and ballroom dancing.

Kay is a member of The Romantic Novelists' Association, The Society of Authors, and The Society of Women Writers and Journalists

STONEMOOR HOUSE

Chapter One

Steeling herself to go out there, Pamela stood by the window watching. Their weary faces transformed now, smiling as light-heartedly as the children they were encouraging, the other women seemed to have shed the war's anguish overnight since VJ Day.

Mothers and grandmothers, aunts and older sisters, they had adopted celebration as naturally as their good frocks, cherished since 1940 and protected now by pinafores. They ran in and out of houses, through yards, up and down white- or yellow-stoned steps, their energy newly restored. Replenishing the tables that stretched halfway along the street, they brought plates of sandwiches, buns and biscuits, jellies, fruit, and custard. Everything was for the youngsters, these jabbering Yorkshire kids who now seemed assured of a decent future.

Pamela had sworn she couldn't endure the street party jollification. One thing only had changed her mind. The look her mother had given her. She had grown to expect the challenge that lay behind the sympathy in those familiar blue eyes; the look that said "Don't give in, don't be soft, love."

Mildred Baker was anything but soft; Pamela could never complain her mother expected more of others than of herself. Widowed when a factory accident killed the father Pamela remembered with lingering affection, Mildred had raised two young boys as well, and cheerfully, bringing them through the war years unaided while Pamela herself was in the WAAF. Tom and Ian were a credit to her now, twelve and fourteen, fun yet with a serious side. The three of them had grown up aware that Mum almost made up for a missing father.

Inhaling deeply in an effort for self-control, Pamela willed herself to walk towards the door. She need only smile, that was all, give her mother reassurance that her daughter had inherited a measure, at least, of her own native grit. And there had been a concession, willingly made: Mildred Baker's word that none of the neighbours would be told, not until after tomorrow. These two days were declared a holiday, after all, for national rejoicing.

Even her brothers didn't know; that also had been on Pamela's insistence. They were excited – about this party, and the bonfires that would follow. She hadn't the heart to burden either Tom or Ian. Tom, although the younger of the pair, was the more thoughtful, would want to share her pain. This wasn't the right time. And as for Ian, he'd always been closer to her, reminding her as he did of the father she had idolised. Ian had suffered badly, all those years ago, through being just old enough to understand what that factory accident meant to their family. She didn't want to bring that sort of distress back into his eyes, the brown of sherry.

Her own eyes gazed back from the pockmarked mirror on the wall by the door, blue irises nearly obscured by lids heavy from lack of sleep, shadows beneath them. Otherwise, she hardly looked any different. Her dark gold hair had been curled last night, wound around pipecleaners, just like every night. As if there still was a reason for making the best of herself. Nothing had been said, but Pamela had known her mother approved. She'd never let herself go either, had she? Memory resurrected Mildred's visit to the woman next door for a home shampoo and set,

before going to the undertaker's all those years ago. At the time, Pamela had believed that unnatural. She'd long since recognised it as one aid to facing the unacceptable.

Always clean and tidy, that was Mildred Baker. Today, as Pamela walked towards her she registered that her mother also generally managed to be smiling. How anyone achieved that, she really couldn't imagine.

"What wants doing?" Pam heard herself asking, addressing not only her mother but the group of housewives congregated behind one of the long sides of the table.

Peggy Kemp from across the street answered.

"Hallo, love. Well, it's the tea we're waiting on. Her next door to me has borrowed a big teapot, she's inside filling it up again now."

"Happen I could help to pour," Pamela suggested, yearning for something to occupy her hands.

"We'd be glad if you would," said her mother. "Your young wrists'll be stronger nor ours, and yon pot's right heavy."

The woman was emerging with the tea, nearly staggering as she carefully negotiated the steps to her yard.

Pamela ran across the grey setts to meet her. "I'm coming to give you a hand."

Filling beakers, cups and the occasional half-pint pot, Pamela hurried back and forth between the table and the blackened sandstone wall where tea was dispensed. Many of the children hadn't seen her since she'd returned to Halifax, and gave her a grin or spared her a word amid chattering with their contemporaries. Being with the youngsters made Pamela feel a bit better, as if her face might not be set permanently in a look of despair. You couldn't frown with them, nobody could, not while they were squabbling over buns, or laughing into their jellies. Pamela herself nearly laughed, watching a lad carefully retrieve jelly that had slithered off his plate

then go dashing indoors to rinse the grit off the wobbling red mound.

They were a grand bunch of kids, united perhaps by the war which, if it hadn't brought much bombing to the town, had produced uniform deprivation. The worst shortage, of their menfolk, had drawn everybody together. And the few dads whose health or age had made them unfit for service had taken other children to their hearts. They had helped out, patching up well-worn toys, teaching skills with battered bicycles, sharing rare wartime treats.

Today the tinies who didn't possess older siblings were tended just the same, and maybe with more patience, by boys and girls alike who enjoyed a mothering role.

"Don't it do your heart good to see 'em?" one mother asked, smiling at Pam. "It's the kids that count, you know, in the end. And we've got a champion lot here, bless 'em."

When Pamela agreed, the woman smiled again. "I daresay that's what you'll be thinking of, now the war's finally over – a family. Have you heard yet when your hubby's due home?"

Pamela shook her head, moved away, became very busy tying the hair ribbon of a tiny girl in a dress hastily made out of a Union Jack.

The child's mother was watching as she collected up empty plates. "Getting your hand in, are you?" she laughed, nudging Pamela's ribs. "You lot that haven't had bairns yet will be making up for lost time, soon as you're together again. When is he coming home, love?"

Evading similar questions became an obsession, while Pamela tried to fill her mind with tasks: small mouths that had to be wiped, and noses; toddlers to be escorted to lavatories. When eventually the women began clearing away the dirty dishes, she took several piles of them into her mother's kitchen, closed the outer door with a thankful sigh.

Mildred Baker bustled in five minutes later. "There, you look a lot better. I knew it was no good shutting yourself away, brooding. It's allus best to keep going with summat. And to mix with folk. You'll not find it nearly so hard next time you meet any of 'em."

No? wondered Pamela. Not when they'll all have heard by then – will be bound to come out with all their advice, their homilies, *sympathy*? One kind word, and she'd go to pieces; two, and she'd never pull herself together again.

"Why don't you put your feet up, Mum? I'll see to these. You've been hard at it all day. And for weeks beforehand, if I know you, baking stuff and so on."

"Aye, well – we knew peace were on its way, didn't we? Had to be prepared."

"So why don't you have a sit down?"

"If you're sure you're all right."

Her mother's iron-grey head was nodding as she dozed in the chair when Pamela finally went through to the living room.

"I've put our stuff away, Mum. I've left other folk's stacked on the kitchen table. It's going to take days for everybody to sort out what's their own."

Mildred nodded. "Time you had a bit of a rest an' all, isn't it?"

"Didn't I say? I'm going out, just for a while, with Dorothy." It was a lie, but she needed to get away, ached to be on her own with this fact that she alone must learn to accept.

"That's right. It'll do you good. You'll happen see the lads, a gang of them's touring the bonfires. The one in the next street were lit afore I came in, I could smell it from

here. Are you going down into town? There'll be dancing in front of the Town Hall, I reckon . . ."

And nobody to dance with, ever.

"See you later, Mum. Ta-ra."

The sky was darkening above the slate roofs of the rows of back-to-back houses. Pamela called goodnight to the folk putting away tables that had been placed end to end along her street. Across Parkinson Lane she spotted their Ian and Tom, faces aglow with excitement, nearly as bright as the flames beginning to devour the pile of timber which some white-haired man was lighting. With a group of lads her brothers were laughing, shrieking, carefree. So light-hearted they seemed younger than their years.

How will I tell them? she thought, how drain their happiness?

From the street end she could see Beacon Hill, justifying its name with a blaze that challenged the bonfires now appearing on countless sites all about her. There would be other beacons too, she supposed, signalling peace across her beloved Yorkshire hills.

Groups of people were hurrying down Parkinson Lane, smiling and talking, heading towards the town centre celebrations.

Pamela turned in the opposite direction, walking briskly, her head down. She'd no desire to talk to anyone, old friend or neighbour. Past silent mills she hastened, terraces and larger semi-detached houses, and she did not glance their way.

The familiarity of years took her up Warley Road and into West View Park. She followed a path now barely visible, merely a paler stripe between stretches of lawn as the night gathered around her. And then there she stood, gazing out from the top of the stone steps where she'd played so often as a youngster.

About and before her ranged the hills, sentinel over the commerce in these valleys of the industrial West Riding. Her favourite place. And lit now with more bonfires flaring at intervals throughout the landscape. Voices carried on drifts of woodsmoke, and laughter, rejoicing.

Pamela swallowed, tears filled her eyes, but she was still too stricken to weep. And dared not let go in case she lost control completely. "Oh, Jim," she sighed, slowly shaking her head.

The news had come yesterday, while she was at the airfield packing to come on leave.

A drunken motorist had finished what Hitler's Luftwaffe had attempted last year – by speeding into Jim's motorbike to crush the head still scarred from the night his fighter crash-landed.

Her own CO had extended her leave indefinitely on compassionate grounds. Arriving home, her mother had held her. Everyone, when they heard, would be just as sympathetic. Nothing could help.

What would she do? With her life – in the immediate future, long term? They had had such plans. Ever since VE Day they'd been planning again. They had worked together before the war, even before they married. It wasn't big, as businesses went, but it had been their own. She had always had a bit of a flair for decorating, had met Jim years ago when, doing up her bedroom, she had been defeated by papering the ceiling.

He'd teased her a bit, but had done a good job, and had talked a lot while he worked, dispensing professional advice along with getting to know her. She had been delighted when Jim asked her to join his firm; even doing the books when she'd rather have been revamping someone's house hadn't really mattered. Gradually, though, he had let her share the actual decorating, and

she had believed she'd found the work to fill the rest of her life.

And now she was on her own. Her feelings were too raw for even thinking about the business. How could she carry on? She would be twenty-seven next birthday: life stretched before her, an unending succession of fruitless days which must be endured.

Unable to bear the view, or anything resembling beauty, Pamela turned away. Leaving the park, she headed back through streets of stone houses where lights shone out from windows proclaiming the joy of release from that everlasting blackout. Passing the end of her own street, and not yet ready for facing her bed and the night, she continued downhill.

Walking swiftly, ignoring the crowds hastening in the same direction, Pam reached Bull Green. She hesitated at last, pondering, staring as yet more folk poured from every road at the wide intersection. Where could she go? Shaking her head over this new lack of purpose, she followed everyone else, numbly, aware only of her desire to walk away from everything.

Surrounded by north country voices, Pam emerged in Southgate and paused again to stare incredulously at the mass of dancing citizens stretching as far as she could see towards the town hall steps.

Over the roadway setts, stumbling on pavement edges, the entire population of Halifax seemed to be dancing. Letting go, letting down their hair, letting victory envelope them.

She had expected to feel more alone, to feel more sharply the emptiness of loss. Somehow, though, she now felt hardly anything. All emotion was dulled by this scene, as unreal as her life with no Jim to return to Yorkshire.

"Pamela! Just the person I wanted to see . . ."

The voice a foot or so behind her head had made her jump. She swung round to meet smiling brown eyes beneath a policeman's helmet.

"Hallo, Roger," she said dejectedly.

"Is Jim home as well?" he asked, searching the nearby throng for his old schoolfriend. "I've heard summat that could be useful to you both. Came across a store of decorating stuff t'other day. Belonged to an old chap who died during the war after a long illness. His widow's not bothered so long as she gets shot of it and makes a bob or two. I have all the details at home, I'll call round with them. There's masses of wallpaper, and plenty of distemper and gloss paint. They've been stored right well, an' all, most of it's going to be all right."

"Thank you, Roger, but . . ." Pam began awkwardly, then stopped, and willed herself to cease being so silly about not telling folk.

"I just know it'd be the very thing to start you off again. With decorating materials likely to be in short supply for ages."

Pamela nodded, swallowed. "I really appreciate you thinking of us, love. It's just – well, I don't know now whatever I shall be doing. Jim – Jim won't be coming home, you see. He was killed, on the road, an accident . . ."

"Oh, God! Oh, no, Pamela . . . When - when was this?"

"Day before yesterday. I heard while I was packing to come on leave."

"Eh, I am sorry! I don't know what to say. Me and Jim were like brothers ever since we were in the Infants together."

"I know."

[&]quot;Whatever will you do, lass?"

"Eh, I don't know. It was all we thought of, getting demobbed, starting the business up again. It's all I know, Roger . . ."

"You were damned good, as well. Especially at working out colour schemes and that. You could still do that, I suppose . . . Why don't we have a talk? I'll come round sometime when I'm off duty. You are stopping with your mother?"

Roger was trying to look at his watch without appearing offhand with her. And then the town hall clock struck the quarter.

"Afraid I've got to meet up with my sergeant now. But I will see you afore so long. Take care, mind."

Why, Pam thought savagely, why take care? When there was nothing to look forward to any longer, no point to this existence. Grimly, she sighed and turned her back on the revellers.

The pungent smell of woodsmoke was stronger than before, wafting to her on the night air, stinging eyes and throat as she trudged uphill, against the flow of excited families, away from the town centre.

Passing the People's Park, she all but choked on a sob trapped inside her. They had walked around its paths so often, she and Jim, had sat listening to the band on Sunday afternoons. Jim was a fanatic about brass bands, had been so proud when they had performed on this bandstand. And then there were all the times while they were courting and had lingered together in the pavilion here to kiss in its limited privacy.

Nothing would ever be the same. No matter what she attempted now, her life was a casualty.

Pamela listened two days later while Roger Jenkins read over the list of decorating materials that he had discovered. She never had liked waste: it would be a terrible shame if all this stuff were not put to good use. During their last leave together Jim had been bemoaning the fact that any such new materials might only be allocated for repairing war-damaged property. If he could have survived, he would have been highly delighted to learn of all this stock.

Determined not to make everybody miserable about her own loss, Pamela asked how Roger was.

"I'm all right," he assured her with a smile. "Not bad at all."

He certainly looked well, the police force evidently suited him. At least there were some things that she could still feel glad about. Roger had joined the RAF at the same time as Jim, but that hadn't lasted. The rigours of training had caused a recurrence of his childhood asthma, in a massive attack. A short stay in hospital had been followed by his discharge on medical grounds before he saw any active service.

Pamela had gathered that once his doctor back home had the asthma under control, Roger had approached the police force about working with them. They had been glad to weigh against his health, taking on a young man when so many of his contemporaries were being conscripted into the forces.

"Have you managed to keep the band together?" she enquired.

"Just about – not that we get to play so often, these days. We rely heavily on the chaps that're retiring age. Sometimes, lads that are on leave join us for one night. I'm afraid there's only me and another fellow around the same age now. You might remember him, he had polio when he was a kid, that's why he's remained in civvies."

Pamela couldn't make a decision about those decorating materials. She felt torn today, her old enthusiasm

for renovating people's houses providing her with mind pictures of how these precious items might be used, compelling her to visualise how good it would be to work again at this job that she had loved.

But her love for Jim had been the greater, and prevented her from contemplating restarting the firm without him.

"I just don't know," she told Roger. "Happen I might be able to think a bit straighter after the funeral."

In the event, the funeral reduced her to such a rigid mass of strain that she could hardly think at all. Jim's mother, widowed long ago like her own, seemed shrunken by grief. Pamela could only grasp the fragile shoulder and watch over the little woman who remained huddled so pathetically on her knees throughout the church service. Her own brothers caused her nearly as much concern. As soon as they were told, both Ian and Tom had insisted that they wished to attend the funeral. Pamela had been touched, glad that they remembered Jim for his interest in everything they did. On the day, though, she felt racked by the sight of tears that neither lad was mature enough to contain.

She herself would not weep, or not until she was quite alone. Despite the days that had elapsed since her return to Halifax, she was still afraid that once she let go she would never cease weeping. And that would never do, she could only rely on herself to somehow find enough stamina for surviving.

The emotion Pamela needed to release had not emerged by the time she was heading back to the airforce base in Kent. But here, at least, she would find some means of occupying the hours that felt so unremittingly empty. Her CO welcomed her back briskly, if with a reminder that she might have extended her compassionate leave.

Pam smiled wanly. "Thanks, but I'm better here really.